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ABSTRACT

Peer modeling as a non-punitive disciplinary technique was examined in two studies assessing its effectiveness in increasing self-control of young children in the absence of an authority figure. The first study investigated the effect of observing the rule-following behavior of a peer model on the observing child's subsequent self-control. Preschool and 2nd and 3rd graders, individually exposed to a televised peer model shown resisting the temptation to play with prohibited toys, were found more likely to follow the rules than were subjects exposed to a control film on television that depicted no role-following model. A week later the children were again left with the prohibited toys. Although they were not reminded not to play with the toys nor re-exposed to the model, experimental boys were much less likely not to touch the toys than were boys in the control group. The second study investigated the effect of having a young child serve as a rule-following model for other children on the model's own subsequent role-following. First and 2nd grade boys who believed they were to serve as televised models for other children violated rules to a significantly lesser degree than did those who did not expect to serve as models. It is cautioned that this sort of peer modeling has not been shown to be effective with all children. Disadvantaged children, for example, were not influenced by the experiences in the second study. (Author/BF)

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The Effect of Peer Modeling on Self-Control in Children: An Alternative to Punishment

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The effectiveness of punishment as a means to induce rule-following and self-control in young children has long been assumed. Certainly, such a conclusion seems warranted for, in daily interactions with children, parents and teachers note that scolding, spanking and assorted other verbally or physically punitive techniques often produce immediately apparent changes in the child's behavior. A normal child who is spanked when detected playing with matches will probably not engage in such behavior again when the punishing agent is present. The effectiveness of any disciplinary tactic must be measured, in part, by the influence of the tactic at the time of its administration. However, the true test of any disciplinary technique is whether it influences the child's behavior after its administration and when the child is not under the supervision of the punishing agent.

Recent research in child psychology has found that, in general, while verbal or physical punishment do cause the child to be a better rule-follower when in the presence of the punishing agent, the child is not always likely to show continued self-control when the agent is absent. There is a body of evidence which even suggests that punishment can lead to levels of deviant behavior above the pre-punishment level when punishment is the primary tactic used in disciplining the child (e.g., Hollenberg and Sperry, 1951). Further, the punished child is likely to exhibit increases in his general aggression level, his resentment of the punishing agent and his alienation from that agent after such a disciplinary encounter--reactions that reduce further the potential effect of the disciplinary agent (Parke, 1972). While the provision of reasons or rationales for rule-following has been shown to increase the liklihood of continued self-control in young children following punishment (e.g., Parke, 1969), clearly, alternative, non-punitive-techniques of

increasing the child's self-control must be developed and their effectiveness assessed in the most objective manner possible.

Two recent research efforts have sought to assess the effect of the disciplinary technique of peer modeling on the self-control displayed by young children when no authority figure is present.

In the first study, executed in collaboration with Dr. Ross Parke of the University of Illinois and Dr. Steven Yussen of the University of Wisconsin, the effect of observing the rule-following behavior of a peer model on the observing child's subsequent self-control was assessed. Preschool and second- and third-grade boys from middle class homes who were individually exposed to a televised peer model resisting the temptation to play with attractive, but prohibited toys were far more likely to follow the rule during a period of isolation after viewing the model than were boys exposed to a control film on television that depicted no rule-following model, even though all of the children had been told not to touch the toys. To assess the potential long-term effect of this brief viewing experience, each child was again left with the prohibited toys one week after seeing the model. They were not reminded of the rule against toy touching nor were they re-exposed to the model. It was found that, although the overall level of toy touching increased slightly, those boys who saw the rule-following model were still much less likely to touch the toys when alone than were boys who did not see the model.

The results of the first study (Toner, Parke, & Yussen, 1977) clearly demonstrated the efficacy of the use of the peer model in promoting long-lasting self-control in young children. Extrapolating from other research on imitation with children, it is likely that rule-following adult models can serve the same purpose as the rule-following peer of this study. In the classroom and in the home,

exposing a child to peers and teachers/parents who follow rules can increase rule-following in children. The first study also provided the following information regarding this technique of exposing children to rule-following models:

(a) younger children are more susceptible to the influence of the models than older children;
(b) highlighting the behavior of the model by letting the observing child act out the behavior of the model during exposure greatly increases the liklihood that younger children will learn from the model, and
(c) exposure to a self-controlling model who follows rules of his/her own volition is far more effective in promoting long-lasting self-control in younger children than exposure to a model who simply follows rules out of obedience to a supervising authority figure.

As an adjunct to the first study, a recent research effort executed in collaboration with Ms. Laura Moore of the University of North Carolina at Charlotte and Ms. Pamela Kidder of the University of Minnesota, investigated the effect of having a young child serve as a rule-following model for other children on the model's own subsequent rule-following. First- and second-grade boys from middle class homes were assigned to one of three types of experiences. One experience involved informing each child that he was going to serve as a model of rule-following behavior for children at another school. A portable television camera would supposedly convey the child's image to the other children while he resisted the temptation to touch a set of attractive, but prohibited toys. The camera was turned on and each child assigned to this experience demonstrated rule-following behavior. Following this experience, each child was observed while alone with the toys to determine how much rule-following he himself would exhibit. The boys assigned to the second experience were told that they were to serve as models of rule-following for other children but, through not fault of their own, they were unable to actually serve as models. Each child in this condition was then left with the toys and observed. Boys in a third

group were individually left with the toys without any mention of serving as a model for others. Even though all of the boys were told not to touch the toys, boys who were told that they would serve as models of rule-following for others touched the toys half as much when alone as did boys not told that they would serve as models. Merely informing the child that he was to be a model or good behavior was sufficient to reduce his deviation from the prohibition. Further, boys who actually served as models of rule-following touched the toys about one-tenth as much as did boys who were not told that they would serve as models.

The results of the second study (Toner, Moore, & Kidder, 1976) demonstrated the efficacy of having the child serve as a model of rule-following behavior for other children on increasing the model's own self-control. However, it was found that this effect was limited to middle class children. The entire study was re-executed with disadvantaged children and there was no significant difference between boys in the three experimental conditions with this sample.

The two studies demonstrated that there are non-punitive-disciplinary techniques that can increase self-control in children. The first study demonstrated the potential benefit to children of watching rule-following models. The second study demonstrated the potential benefit to children of serving as rule-following models. Since the technique advocated herein does not involve punishment at all when properly administered, it may avoid some of the undersirable side effects associated with punishment, such as increases in the child's aggression, resentment, and alienation. Yet, this conclusion must include a note of caution. The peer modeling technique has yet to be shown to be effective with all children. Disadvantaged children, for example, were not influenced by the experiences in the second study. Therefore, the technique of peer modeling should not

necessarily be considered as the best alternative to punishment for all children. Disadvantaged children, whose disciplinary history is often largely one of unelaborated punishment from authority figures (Hess & Shipman, 1967) cannot always be expected to respond to the subtleties of peer modeling. It is proper to conclude that peer modeling can work quite well for children. However, the children must be prepared to learn from the peer model. In the final analysis, the use of this disciplinary technique, as with any technique, must be adapted to the needs and capabilities of the individual child in order to maximize its effectiveness in promoting lasting self-control in the child.

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